

May 19, 2019 – (Easter 5, Romans 1)

Sermon Text – Romans 1:1-17

- For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." -

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...” I’ve told this story before, but I think it bears repeating. When I was studying at the seminary, I had an instructor who liked to recall how his father had used this exact verse to put him and the rest of his family to the test. He said that it would invariably happen when the family was eating out at a busy restaurant. It didn’t matter if it was a fancy dining place or a fast food joint. They would order their food. It would arrive at their tables. They would be ready to dig in. But before they could do that, they already knew exactly what was coming. Before anyone could eat, my instructor’s dad would stand up, clear his throat and proclaim in a loud voice, “In this family, we are not ashamed of the gospel; so, let us pray...” And then he would loudly go on, thanking God for the food, for those who had prepared it and for their time together as they ate their meal. My instructor, and many of the others in his family, would try to shrink away as best they could, horrified by his father’s behavior and embarrassed that they had to endure this regular public display. Now, of course, he was a teenager. And I know how easy it is to embarrass teenagers. A parent’s slight head-bob to the beat of the music on the radio is enough to set them off. And sometimes, even your mere presence is more than a teenager can handle. The point is that proclaiming one’s faith in public is not always so easy. We live in a world that continues to devalue faith, push it to the side and see it as little more than foolishness and superstition. At the same time, other faiths are rising to claim their rightful place in our pluralistic world. They will present alternative ideas and rival interpretations that will challenge traditional understandings and beliefs.

So, how does one cope? What should a person do? St. Paul says in the introduction to his letter that he is a “servant of” Jesus Christ. Some Bible interpreters suggest that it might be better to translate that as “slave to” Jesus Christ. That is a concept that Paul would have understood. Because of his calling as an apostle, Paul felt obligated to Jesus in the strongest way. He was claimed by, possessed by, owned by the gospel. In effect, he had no choice but to proclaim the gospel. But why would he want to do anything else? He can find no reason. The gospel in itself is that

compelling. “It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” I think we need to hear that today. The love of God in Jesus Christ is so great that we have no reason to be any- thing less than proud. God’s love is for us. God’s mercy is for us. God’s forgiveness, God’s peace and God’s joy is for us. And it is intended for all the world, for everyone, for all who may hear and receive the good news. That is the trajectory that we are following during these final weeks of Easter. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just for the few of God’s chosen. It is intended to be for all of God’s people, indeed for all of God’s creation. It is meant to be spread from its beginnings in Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria and on to the ends of the earth.

For Paul and the early church, Rome represented the “ends of the earth.” It was a most important city. It was far away. And it was the capital of the entire empire. Paul had never been there. The congregation of believers was one of a significant few that he had not founded himself. Therefore, in his letter, he needs to introduce himself fully as he prepares for a chance to visit the Roman Christians. As he nears the end of his career, Paul hopes to visit them and then continue on to spread his preaching to the people of Spain. In the meantime, here is his proclamation of the gospel for everyone to examine. He is not ashamed of it. He is proud of what he has to say. Today, we are baptizing another Child in response to this good news. In a few moments, we will make clear that Liam is claimed in the waters of baptism, not as a slave, but as a child, a child of God, who is a recipient of God’s grace, a brother with Jesus Christ, who is loved with a great and precious love, by the one who gave his whole self for us all, his body, his blood, his life, his death, his resurrection, all of it, so that we might know love and have life in his name. In that, there is no reason to be ashamed. Instead, we can all be proud, like Paul, of our callings as believers and proclaimers of the gospel.

Amen.